

KISSINGER'S APPARAT

by John P. Leacacos

A top Washington's complex foreign affairs bureaucracy sits the National Security Council, a 24-year-old body given new status in 1969, when President Nixon moved to make it a kind of command and control center for his foreign policy. The new Nixon NSC system, run from the White House by Henry A. Kissinger, has now existed for nearly three years, producing 138 numbered study memoranda, reaching 127 formal decisions, and employing a permanent staff of about 120 personnel (more than double the pre-Nixon figure). Though the substance of its operations are necessarily secret, interviews with officials permit tentative evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the Kissinger NSC. There is broad agreement on the following seven points:

--The NSC has served President Nixon more or less as he desired, that is, in the ordered style of formal answers to detailed questionnaires. The volume of this paperwork has at times been staggering, but it has sharpened focus on the search for policy choices.

--The answers and alternatives for action, "coming up through the NSC" have produced few panaceas, but have contributed greater coherence of outlook in foreign affairs management. NSC recommendations are more pragmatic than academic, reflecting Kissinger's view: "We don't make foreign policy by logical syllogism."

--Explicit insistence on the "limited" nature of U.S. power and the need for greater restraint and cautious deliberation about its exercise have been reinforced at the highest level by Nixon's habit of withdrawing to make final decisions in solitude and of frequently deciding on no-action rather than accepting advice to initiate new action.

--By being close to the President and keeping his fingers on all aspects of the NSC process personally, Kissinger without question is the prime mover in the NSC system. The question arises whether the NSC would function as effectively without Kissinger, and whether it can bequeath a heritage of accomplishment to be absorbed by the permanent machinery of the NSC.

--Secretary of State William P. Rogers

operates within the NSC system and also utilizes it as a forum to establish whatever policy position is preferred by his State Department; but he side-steps the NSC on occasion to carry his demurrer, dissent or alternate position to the President privately.

--Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird is less personally involved in the NSC process, having apparent indifference to what he believes is unnecessary NSC paperwork, which he leaves to his deputy, David Packard. Laird's main day-to-day operational preoccupation is with the exit of U.S. forces from Vietnam. His International Security Affairs Bureau in the Pentagon performs poorly by Washington bureaucratic standards.

--The influence on foreign policy of the military, including the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who are usually represented in the NSC process, is at the lowest point in several years. This has been attributed to the anticlimactic winding-down atmosphere of the Vietnam war, and to the fact that the Chiefs' once die-hard views and abstract argumentation on strategic nuclear superiority over the Soviet Union have been successfully emulsified into the Nixon-Kissinger basic principles for SALT negotiations with Russia. Kissinger has commented: "In my experience with the military, they are more likely to accept decisions they do not like than any other group."

From time to time, gears have clashed within the system. The State Department has complained bitterly of the "Procrustean bed" fashioned by the Kissinger staff. Meeting excessive White House demands, bureaucrats allege, robs State and Defense of manpower hours needed for day-to-day operations. After his first year, Kissinger conceded: "Making foreign policy is easy; what is difficult is its coordination and implementation."

White House NSC staffers, on the other hand, exuberant at their top-dog status, express a degree of condescension for the work of the traditional departments. In 1969 Kissinger staffers rated State-chaired studies and recommendations only "50 to 70 percent acceptable" and based on mediocre reporting which failed to sift wheat from chaff in the political cables constantly arriving from 117 U.S. embassies overseas. The Kissinger staff say that they have to hammer out the real choices on the hard issues, since a cynical and sometimes bored bureaucracy offers up too many "straw options." State's planners, for